

PRICE, 5 CENTS

FIRST ESSAY

CIVIL SERVICE REFORM

BY

MARION COUTHOUY SMITH

of the Woman's Club of Orange, N. J.

NEW YORK

Published for the

WOMEN'S AUXILIARY

to the

CIVIL SERVICE REFORM ASSOCIATION

1901

14
H. C. C. C.

FEB 12 1910



J 11691

.S 67

Civil Service Reform

By MARION COUTHOUY SMITH

OF THE WOMAN'S CLUB OF ORANGE, NEW JERSEY

The history of the civil service in our country, its gradual demoralization and gradual reform, is by no means a mere record of unfaithfulness or depravity on the part of our governing powers, although these elements have entered into the matter. It is largely the history of an inevitable problem, slowly working itself out, through a maze of error and difficulty and confusion, until the solution is reached through the development of a more enlightened public sentiment, and the increase of national responsibilities.

The difficulty is one with which every nation is forced to contend; but the standard of the Republic is high; it challenges the world's criticism. The moral demand upon a nation is higher in proportion to the ideal set forth in its governmental documents, and the difficulty of fulfilling the demand is correspondingly great. The Republic is the "city set upon an hill"; it is a deliberate effort to fulfil the best ideal of government known to man.

The civil service is to the body politic what the circulation of the blood is to the individual body. It brings—or should bring—the beneficent action of the government into every part, even to the remotest members. It is the most vital element of the state, the organ of effectiveness in achievement and progress. While the military service is for emergency, the civil service is for daily living. Corruption in its ranks sends corruption everywhere, blocks the efficiency of legislation, and renders executive action inert and fitful. If the people cannot secure good service in public utilities, then the people are not the ruling power, no matter what the Constitution may say. If the nation cannot secure good consular and colonial service, then the form of government of which we boast is rather a source of weakness than of strength to the race.

It is well known that that hydra-headed monster, the "spoils system," first put in its sinister appearance under Andrew Jackson, a fact which it is difficult to reconcile with some of his forcible utterances on the subject of good appointments. How-

ever, the origin of the system goes deeper than Jackson's reckless removals and thoughtless appointments of his personal friends. The conception of politics as a game to be played for self-advancement, and of party adherence at any cost, is attributed to Aaron Burr, and to his follower Martin Van Buren, who had afterwards as President, an opportunity to carry out in its fullness, the system of party patronage already devised. Strong hands at first held them back; and through all the years during which the most corrupt conditions prevailed, strong voices were raised, from time to time, in favor of honor and justice and purification. In the Senate, in 1832, Henry Clay thus stigmatized the prevalent methods: "It is a detestable system, drawn from the worst periods of the Roman Republic; and if it were to be perpetuated if the offices, honors, and dignities of the people were to be put up to a scramble, to be decided by the result of every presidential election, our Government and institutions, becoming intolerable, would finally end in a despotism as inexorable as that of Constantinople."

It was in the course of an answer to this very speech that Senator Marcy uttered those memorable words, "To the victors belong the spoils," a saying afterwards virtually adopted as the motto of the professional politician. Every President has disclaimed it. Almost to a man, they condemned the system, yet succumbed in some degree to its terrible pressure. Lincoln himself was a victim to its savage importunities. In his day, the questions demanding solution were the most crucial, and the duties most arduous, ever yet known to the Nation; yet the President's time and strength were wasted, and great decisions hindered, by the clamors of the office-seeking crew. Pressed by vast national issues, Lincoln was compelled to neglect the civil service problem, and thus matters became worse during the administration of the man of all others purest from the pollution of self or party interest, and most devoted to the honor and welfare of the people. So difficult is it to check an evil that has once gained headway.

During the middle part of the century the entire service, from heads of departments to the lowest subordinates, was rotted through with abuses resulting from patronage and the spoils system. Government offices were practically regarded as a sort of charitable institution,—an asylum for the incompetent. The consequences of course, were endless confusion and extravagance. Public funds were wasted, and public utilities carried on with disgraceful inefficiency. There was a time in the '60s

when drunken carriers and sorters could be found hanging about the New York Post-office. Such details serve to encourage us as to the present status of reform, much as there is still to be desired. Meanwhile, the few public officers who were worthy and competent lived with the sword of Damocles hanging over their heads, and their best efforts were paralyzed by uncertainty. A change of administration was for some, a calamity; for others, a shameful opportunity.

The strangest thing about all this corruption was the fact that few openly acquiesced in it, and efforts at reform were incessantly in progress. Resolutions were passed, most of which never got beyond committees and were simply alarming statements without satisfactory results. Such voices as those of Webster, Clay, Calhoun, and others of like prominence, were raised in favor of the repeal of the Act of 1820, and of similar practical methods of reform. A step in the right direction was the trial of pass examinations as a test of efficiency for government employees, but these were found inadequate, as they failed to exclude influence, and did not sufficiently raise the standard. The first legislation leading directly to the present system was enacted in 1871, and was embodied in an amendment to the civil appropriation bill. It authorized the President to "prescribe such rules and regulations for the admission of persons into the civil service of the United States as will best promote the efficiency thereof"; and also to ascertain the fitness of each candidate in all necessary particulars, and to employ suitable persons to conduct inquiries. This was the nucleus of the Civil Service Act of 1883. Presidents Grant and Hayes made earnest efforts on behalf of this legislation, with favorable results. President Arthur advocated the best features of the English system, including life tenure, and competitive examinations. At last on January 16, 1883, after years of struggle, involving endless committee work, amendment, and debate, the present law was passed, marking an era in the history of the civil service. Its most important provision is for the appointment of a non-partisan Commission, consisting of three members, to prepare and enforce rules, and furnish annual reports. It also provides for competitive examinations, the graded classification of nominees for subordinate positions, and the gradual extension of this system, by Executive action, until, presumably the entire subordinate service, above the grade of laborers, shall be covered by the Rules. The heads of departments are appointed as before.

Whatever the faults or shortcomings of the Act of 1883, it has within it the seed of reform, which has already borne abundant fruit. But no sooner was the necessary legislation secured, than the great problem of enforcement made itself felt. The history of the service since the law was passed is the history of a continual struggle; and it is only in the aggregate that we can fully appreciate the victories that have been won. To secure the proper enforcement, it was necessary that the President should himself be a radical reformer, that the Civil Service Commission should perform its work with thoroughness and good judgment; and that Congress should make liberal appropriations for the purpose, and should enact, from time to time, such laws as should be necessary for progress. As to the first condition, it is unfortunate that, in spite of worthy sentiments on the subject of reform uttered in messages and inaugural addresses, we have never since before Jackson's term, had a President whose actions were unvaryingly and consistently favorable to the purification of the service. They have all been more or less entangled in party affiliations and so-called party obligations. The intrusion of party interest is fatal; it has been proved so, not a thousand, but a million times. It has corrupted our municipal governments; it has touched the military service in time of war, wounding it more cruelly than the enemy could do; it has crippled public utilities, and hindered the establishment of government ownership in cases where private ownership is manifestly unjust. The President must of necessity be the representative of a party, in certain broad principles upon which parties are arrayed upon one side or another, and which may be regarded more or less as open questions; but in matters wherein personal character and public service are alone concerned, he should take his stand above the reach of partisan interest or feeling. So long as the Executive is in any sense the slave of his party, so long will he be unable to accomplish a just, fearless and radical reform. This fact is widely appreciated, but the difficulty of securing progressive Congressional action is not so well known. Many a good measure is blocked, and dangerous measure pushed through, by the subtle friends of the spoils system among our Senators and Representatives. With the Civil Service Commissioners, eternal vigilance is the price of success. The keenest insight and foresight, the boldest action, the most unsparing labor, must be given to their work; and such vision, such action, and such toil, have not been lacking among those appointed for this arduous task. Men of sterling quality are

needed for this work. Delays, mistakes, or compromises cannot be tolerated. The march of progress depends upon the appropriations, which are often gained only after a hard fight; and also upon the constant increase in the classified service, which at the beginning of the present Administration, included over eighty thousand places, having been largely extended by Presidents Harrison and Cleveland.

But on the whole, we may conclude that we are always in danger of losing ground if more far-seeing action and more rigorous supervision be not maintained. As to present conditions, however, it is possibly unjust to place the entire blame upon the Administration. The complex machinery of the Federal service requires a more accurate regulating power than has yet been devised, as well as a sterner and more honest enforcement on all sides.

Whatever laws may be passed from time to time, it is plain that a mightier force even than the law itself must be brought to bear upon this question. Public sentiment is the power behind the throne in all constitutional governments. As a moral force put into vigorous action, it is irresistible. The first step is to enlighten and quicken it; and this process is largely individual. When each man or woman sees the truth, and does what he or she can do to promote it, the ideals of the Republic can be realized. That we see the truth, and see it more clearly every day, is indisputable; but to see and not act is fatal. It is at this very point that we come upon our characteristic national weakness. We are quick to see, quick to speak, but slow to act. We perceive a wrong, laugh or sigh over it, and then go about our business, trusting to our national good luck to bring the matter around all right. A man will not soil his fingers by touching political matters; he neglects to vote, he tells his neighbor that if such or such a system be not reformed, the country will go to perdition; but it does not occur to him that he has any power to stop the *descensus Averni*. A woman, lacking the direct power of the ballot, forgets her possible share in moving the mighty engine of public opinion. So they shake their heads over the problem, and pass by on the other side. Yet it is by the united power of every heart, every mind, and every voice, that the great deeds of time are at length accomplished. Public sentiment is a grand movement of the aggregate thought; and every one of us can help to charge it with power. And so charged it will pass into action, and sweep all before it.

As to practical suggestions, the first step is for voters. Fill

the elective offices with men whose appointments you can trust; this has a direct bearing upon the civil service. So much mischief can be done by corrupt Senators and Representatives that the elections to Congress are scarcely of secondary importance to the presidential elections. The excitement of party, on the latter occasions, often causes voters to forget the exceeding importance of choosing men of sound principles and high attainments as the immediate representatives of the people, the wielders of the law-making power. The next step is to impose an effectual check upon the appointing and removing agencies. Public opinion must be brought to bear upon public officers with a force that cannot be ignored. An enlightened press is a great power in this direction. The press must truly represent public opinion, and must make itself respected. All methods that are in themselves despicable are ineffective. Sensational abuse and insulting cartoons defeat their purpose. The press, as the voice of an enlightened and fair-minded people, will do excellent service, as in many instances it does to-day. A journal or periodical that both instructs and expresses public opinion, on the higher plane, is an instrument for good on every point it touches.

Another powerful agency is organization. Such societies as the National Civil Service League, and the Civil Service Reform Associations of the principal cities, constantly studying conditions, protesting, agitating, and influencing legislation, have a mission for good beyond our power to estimate. The inclusion of the Women's Auxiliary in New York brings to bear a new and purifying element upon the work of the Association. For such exalted patriotic service it is well that the men and women of the nation should labor together.

Of all things most important is the education of the young for the duties of citizenship. This should begin in the home, and the strongest influence of educated womanhood should be brought to bear upon it. The school should regard it as of supreme importance; and no opportunity should be lost to impress upon the children of the Republic their future share in the government. Much has been done of late in this direction, and it is a subject for congratulation. The principal use of patriotic societies is to carry on educational work. And such institutions as Mr. George's "Junior Republic" are of far-reaching benefit. The time must come, when we train young men, and if necessary young women, for work under the government as we train them for business, for the professions, or for the

army and navy. When the civil service is a profession in itself, its honorable character will be recognized. As its *personnel* becomes higher in character, the service will be less complicated. Fewer individuals may be employed, and salaries may be raised. When compensation is inadequate, service is inferior; and when service is superior, compensation will rise in answer to the demand. The two conditions react upon one another.

It has already been suggested that a strong force in favor of reform is the increase of national responsibility. It was this that brought about the improvements in the English system. Civil Service Reform in England was first applied to Indian affairs, and afterwards generally extended. It first took shape in the India Bill of 1853, in the framing of which Lord Macaulay was largely concerned. His special point was that of competitive examinations. England found that a sound system was absolutely essential in her colonial governments; therefore the clearest and most powerful minds in the United Kingdom were brought to bear upon a problem so imperative. It must always be understood, however, that the spur of responsibility will act only upon a sensitive public conscience. Spain was apparently unmoved by the scandal of her colonial governments; China is indifferent to the civil corruption which permeates every nook and corner of her empire. But the English-speaking races have in them that power of self-improvement which is the strongest element of self-government. Upon such peoples responsibility acts as a remedial and purifying agency; rousing them from supine self-content by that old trumpet-call, "Now it is high time to awake out of sleep!"

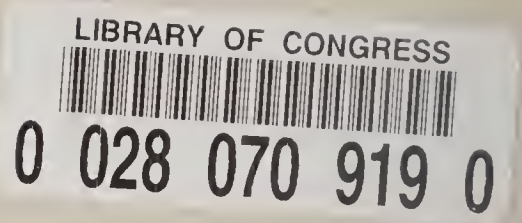
Without entering at all into the question of whether national expansion is right or wrong for our country, we may take it that national expansion is now an accomplished fact, and that it is not profitable to lament over it, but rather to use it as an opportunity for national improvement. Our place among the powers is such that a defective consular service can no longer be tolerated; while a defective colonial service (if such it can be called at the present juncture) will inevitably bring us to shame, if not to ruin. Great work must be done by men who are great in mind, in character, and in action. Our regular military service, and more particularly the naval branch, will serve to show what the men of the Republic can be and do under severe tests, when their training and appointments are free from the political taint. Where the military service has cleared the way,

the civil service must build up our supremacy and sustain our honor.

We want the man for the place; such a man, for example, as Leonard Wood in Cuba,—and we must put him there, without regard to his party theories or affiliations. If he be the king—"the man who *can*"—we cannot deny him his kingdom. For we need him more than he needs us. We know that in the extension of a beneficent rule, either by constitutional or authoritative methods, weakness, delay or corruption are more than dangerous. We cannot afford to support the ignoble army of incompetents. The nation owes to itself the honor of the true man's work, and owes to him the help that must be accorded him by trained subordinates. This is true both at home and abroad; but it should begin at home before it is brought before us by that sternest of all rebukes—

"Cold, edged with dear-bought wisdom—
The judgment of your peers."

The test time has come; the finger of Divine Judgment is ready to inscribe the hand-writing on the wall, that shall never be effaced. May it be for our country, what it only can be through faithfulness to our highest ideals,—"*Thou art not found wanting.*" So shall we fulfil the largest hope of the coming age.



President,
Mrs. W. H. Schieffelin.

Vice-President,
Mrs. C. R. Lowell.

Treasurer,
Mrs. Winthrop Cowdin.

Secretary,
Miss A. J. G. Perkins

Executive Committee,

the officers and

Miss Elizabeth Luther Cary,	Miss Schurz,
Mrs. Noah H. Chapman,	Miss Whitney,
Mrs. A. G. Norrie,	Mrs. George McAneny,
	<i>ex-officio.</i>

All communications and requests for publications should be addressed to the

Assistant Secretary,
Miss A. E. H. Meyer,
48 West 59th Street,
New York City.